

Queen of Dreams

By RANJITA BISWAS

Award-winning writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni did not know that she had a storyteller inside her until she went to the United States for further studies. The 19-year-old from Calcutta had never traveled abroad. She felt lost amid the cornfields of Ohio. She missed home terribly, and then her grandfather, with whom she was very close, died. “I couldn’t go home. Lying on the bed I tried to visualize how it was back home, and couldn’t. Writing made me remember. I wrote for myself, to keep linked, but never thought that I’d take up writing as a career one day,” she recalls. “America made me a writer. Being in a whole different culture suddenly changed me. It made me question many things, especially about women’s roles.”

Divakaruni’s experiences—as well as those of many like her, caught between cultures and conflicting loyalties—are woven into her short story collection *Arranged Marriage*, which received the American Book Award in 1996. Her other best-selling works are the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Mistress of Spices* and the story collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. Divakaruni also writes poetry and children’s literature.

As a writer, Divakaruni is an admirer of magic realism. She finds many similarities between Indian folktale traditions and those of the American Indians, “particularly in terms of the healers with special powers. Both cultures consider them important, and they are central to my novels such as *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams*, my latest work.”

At present, she is researching a novel using characters from the Indian epic Mahabharata. “It’s going to be a woman’s story narrated through protagonist Draupadi’s eyes. I want to examine the epic’s other women characters in their many dimensions,” she says.

Sensitivity to women’s private stories moved her and a few friends to found Maitri, a support group for South Asian women in the United States. When she began volunteering in local women’s shelters in California, she became sensitive to problems such as domestic violence. “One day, an Indian woman came to the shelter. She was thin and beautiful and was obviously very scared. ‘How will I survive in America?’ she asked. ‘I am only a wife.’ Though she gathered up enough courage to approach us, she went away when her husband came to fetch her. I never saw her again. Her face still haunts me.”

Obviously, there were many more South Asian women like her who had left behind their homelands and were helplessly caught in abusive relationships. To help them the Maitri hotline

American writer
Chitra B. Divakaruni
draws on her
Indian heritage and
her immigrant
experiences of
loneliness and
acceptance.

Courtesy Chitra B. Divakaruni



was born in 1991. Today, it is a large organization with branches across the United States. It helps women find jobs, gives scholarships, connects women to job training programs and provides long-term housing for those who need a place to stay. It also works to prevent violence among teenagers. “Domestic violence exists everywhere,” Divakaruni says. “It is not a matter of how technologically developed a country is.”

An American citizen now, and mother of two boys “who often give me good ideas for my children’s books,” Divakaruni teaches creative writing and contemporary Indian literature at the University of Houston in Texas.

As an immigrant, she tries to balance both cultures. “Living in another country is such an opportunity to learn....At the same time, it doesn’t mean you have to forget about your own cultural roots.” She says she allows her sons to make their own choices but guides them when she can, steering them away from wild partying and drugs and emphasizing hard work and honesty. “I want them to have friends of all races.”

Does she still feel like an outsider in America, like some characters in her books?

“Yes and no. America has many diverse communities from different countries. Overall, the country is very hospitable and gives opportunities to grow. Saying that, I’d also say, because I am not a white immigrant, but a South Asian one, the experience is different, compared to, say, a European immigrant. It has its own advantage for me as a writer. I can see the differences and draw on them for my work.” □

About the Author: *Ranjita Biswas is a Calcutta-based freelance journalist who also translates literature and writes fiction.*